POLITICAL FEATURE NO. 1-1759 NOVEMBER 3, 1976
CHARLES MEDD

THE VOTERS PICK CARTER

ANNCR:

THE 1976 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IS OVER, AND CHARLES MEDD HAS THESE OBSERVATIONS.

VOICE:

IN ONE OF THE MOST UNPREDICTABLE ELECTIONS IN AMERICAN HISTORY, JIMMY CARTER HAS WITHSTOOD AN ELEVENTH-HOUR SURGE BY GERALD FORD TO BECOME THIS NATION'S THIRTY-NINTH PRESIDENT. FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE NINETEEN THIRTY-TWO, AND ONLY THE SECOND TIME IN THIS CENTURY, THE VOTERS HAVE REJECTED AN INCUMBENT PRESIDENT, CHOOSING INSTEAD A MAN FEW HAD EVER HEARD OF ONE YEAR EARLIER.

BUT THE BIG STORY OF THIS CAMPAIGN WAS THE MAN FROM GEORGIA WHO ROSE FROM OBSCURITY TO BECOME THE OVERWHELMING FAVORITE AT MID-YEAR, ONLY TO SEE HIS ONCE-CONVINCING LEAD IN THE PUBLIC OPINION POLLS ALL-BUT DISAPPEAR BY ELECTION DAY. FEW MEN HAD CLIMBED TO THE TOP OF A MAJOR NATIONAL PARTY IN SHORTER TIME AND WITH FEWER CONVENTIONAL CREDENTIALS. THE FORMER NAVAL OFFICER WHO BECAME A SUCCESSFUL PEANUT-GROWER HAD SERVED BUT A SINGLE FOUR-YEAR TERM AS GOVERNOR OF GEORGIA, A SOUTHERN STATE FAR REMOVED FROM THE TRADITIONAL CENTERS OF POWER AND PUBLICITY. TO WIN HIS PARTY'S NOMINATION AGAINST A FULL-DOZEN BETTER-KNOWN RIVALS, CARTER PORTRAYED HIMSELF AS THE PEOPLE'S CANDIDATE WHO UNDERSTOOD THEIR FRUSTRATIONS, THEIR GROWING DISTRUST OF GOVERNMENT. HE PROMISED LITTLE MORE THAN PERSONAL QUALITIES -- HONESTY, INTEGRITY AND STRONG LEADERSHIP -- ALONG WITH A VISION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE BUILT ON THE SIMPLE THEME OF

LOVE AND COMPASSION.

LAST JULY, AS THE DEMOCRATS UNITED BEHIND THEIR CANDIDATE, THE REPUBLICANS WERE STILL LOCKED IN A BITTER STRUGGLE BETWEEN GERALD FORD AND RONALD REAGAN. MOREOVER, THE EVENTUAL NOMINEE WOULD FACE THE TWIN BURDENS OF WATERGATE AND AN ECONOMY WRACKED BY INFLATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT. THE EARLY POLLS GAVE DEMOCRAT CARTER AN UNPRECEDENTED, AND SEEMINGLY INSURMOUNTABLE, LEAD OF SOME THIRTY PERCENTAGE POINTS.

AS THE CAMPAIGN REACHED ITS FINAL STAGE THAT LEAD BEGAN TO VANISH, POINTING TO AN EXTREMELY CLOSE ELECTION, AND IN THE EYES OF SOME EXPERTS A POSSIBLE FORD UPSET WIN. BUT ON ELECTION DAY ITSELF, A LARGER THAN EXPECTED VOTER TURN-OUT BROUGHT VICTORY TO THE FIRST CANDIDATE FROM THE DEEP SOUTH SINCE BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR.

EARLY ANALYSIS SHOWS THAT THREE FACTORS LED TO THIS ELECTION RESULT. MISTER CARTER, WITH OVERWHELMING SUPPORT IN HIS NATIVE SOUTH, SUCCEEDED IN RECONSTRUCTING THE OLD DEMOCRATIC PARTY COALITION THAT INCLUDES ORGANIZED LABOR, THE BLACKS AND OTHER ETHNIC VOTERS. IN ADDITION, A MAJORITY OF THE SURPRISINGLY LARGE NUMBER OF VOTERS WHO REMAINED UNDECIDED UNTIL THE FINAL DAY CAST THEIR LOT WITH THE MAN FROM GEORGIA. IN WHAT WAS THE ULTIMATE DECISION FOR ALL VOTERS -- THE CHOICE BETWEEN AN INCUMBENT WHO PROMISED PRETTY MUCH THE STATUS QUO AND A CHALLENGER WHO PROMISED CHANGE -- THE VOTERS OPTED FOR CHANGE.

MAH/RCS